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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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SIPDIS
AMEMBASSY MINSK SENDS

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SUBJECT: BELARUS ELECTION CONDITIONS: AT POLLING PLACES, SOME
ENCOURAGING SIGNS

REF: VILNIUS 734

¶1. (SBU) The early voting stage of Belarusian parliamentary elections began Tuesday September 23 and will continue through Saturday September 27, with the majority of voters expected to cast their ballots on the full voting day (Sunday September 28). As reported reftel, the GOB missed a number of opportunities to make significant improvements in electoral conditions, leaving supervision and transparency of the vote count -- which will begin after the polls close at 8:00 p.m. local time on September 28 -- the last key opportunity to prove that the elections are being conducted better than before.

¶2. (SBU) To form initial impressions and determine the receptivity to vote count observation, Charge and PAO observed early voting at ten different polling places in Borisov (September 24) and Minsk (September 26), and spoken with district election commission chairs in Borisov and Zhodino. So far, we have been received cordially and professionally at each polling station and been allowed to learn the total number of voters, been shown ballots and voters' lists, been allowed to inspect the ballot boxes, and have been informed about the number of persons who have voted so far. (In the latter regard, one polling station in Minsk has reported September 26 that 22 percent of voters have already cast their ballots; in other precincts, the number has been reported as ten percent or less.)

¶3. (SBU) Polling stations have been well marked, and materials providing photographs and brief biographies of the registered candidates have been displayed prominently. Uniformed police have been present in most polling stations to provide for the security of the early ballot boxes, which are sealed at night by precinct election commission (PEC) members and then locked in safes on site. When asked, district election commissions have readily provided us with copies of candidates' campaign materials and posters, as well as general posters advertising the elections. In the course of discussions this week, we have met with a number of OSCE/ODIHR observers who have shared similar impressions with us.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) While what we have seen so far is encouraging, true judgment of the conduct of elections must necessarily wait until all observers' reports have been filed and ODIHR makes its first conclusions known. The absence of guarantees for close observation of the vote count is unfortunate, but is consistent with current electoral legislation that grants PEC chairs the authority to allow observation or not. So far, the PEC officials we have encountered have been very hospitable and said they would welcome our observation of the counting process.

MOORE
LEADER